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ON PAGE F-1

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
2 September 1984

Flight 007: A mystery without end

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"I am closing on the target," the pilot of the Soviet SU-15 interceptor radioed to his ground commanders as he approached Korean Air Lines Flight 007 over the Sea of Japan.

Seconds later he reported that he had switched on his firing system, and then he continued: "I have executed the launch [of two heat-seeking missiles] The target is destroyed"

With that, the Boeing 747 jumbo jet, its 240 passengers and 29 crew members, plunged into the sea. There was no call of distress. And despite extensive searches by American, Japanese and Soviet vessels, the wreckage of the aircraft, along with the "black box" that recorded the last moments of the jet's flight, was never found.

Among the 61 Americans who perished was Larry McDonald, a Democratic congressman from Georgia and chairman of the strongly anti-communist John Birch Society.

Now, a year after the downing of the aircraft, the mystery around the plane with its James Bond flight number remains. As one State Department official said last week, "007 unfortunately is going to remain kind of a dream topic for conspiracy buffs."

Scores of questions have been asked, but not many have been answered with finality. And all the governments involved have withheld at least some of the information they have, partly out of fear of giving away the capability of electronic eavesdropping equipment they use to spy on one another.

Why had the Korean pilot veered about 300 miles off course into Soviet airspace? Had he tried to make up lost time or save fuel by shaving some mileage off the New York-to-Seoul flight after leaving the stop

in Anchorage, Alaska? Had there been an error in plotting the plane's flight path?

Questions such as those assume that the KAL flight was a routine commercial flight, which KAL, the South Korean government and the United States insistently have said was the case.

The Soviet Union, which belatedly admitted shooting down the aircraft after the United States had obtained a tape of Soviet pilots describing their pursuit of the plane, has contended since then that the KAL flight was on a spy mission. The admission that it shot down the plane came six days after the event.

In recent days, as the Sept. 1 anniversary approached, the Soviet Union loosed a welter of charges against the Reagan administration over the airliner's fate. In a new twist, broadcast a week ago, Radio Moscow contended that the United States had detonated a bomb on board the aircraft to cover up its intelligence mission after it had been intercepted. That way there would be no proof of the plane's real purpose, it said.

It attributed the information to an interview that a retired U.S. diplomat, John Keppel, gave to an Italian newspaper. Keppel, however, later said he had only speculated that the plane's fuel tanks may have exploded after being hit by the Soviet missiles.

In other recent articles in the Soviet press, the Soviets renewed charges that President Reagan willfully risked the plane's fate by sending it into Soviet airspace to draw a response from Soviet fighters. That left the Soviets no choice but to shoot the plane down, the Soviets said, since its mission was espionage.

The theory that Flight 007 was involved in espionage has been offered in the West as well. Various writers have advanced circumstantial and largely inconclusive evidence that the plane had a covert intelligence assignment, requiring it to penetrate Soviet airspace in a relatively remote corner of the world that teems with military installations.

Among them is the British publication *Defense Attache*, which said this year that the plane was equipped for electronic espionage. Last week, KAL filed suit in British court against the publication, contending that the airline had been libeled by the report.

The airline's denials of any espionage activity have been supported by the conclusions of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), a United Nations agency that issued its report in December.

"No evidence was found during the investigation to indicate that the flight crew of Korean Air Lines 007 was, at any time, aware of the flight's deviation from its planned route in spite of the fact that it continued along the same general off-track flight path for some 5 hours and 26 minutes," the report said.

The agency speculated that the incident originated with a computer-age typographical error: A single wrong number punched into the flight program at the flight's outset could have caused the plane to veer 10 degrees off course. But it cautioned that its investigation "was compelled to proceed on the basis of

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